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## Madonna, Monster and Other Stories: Surrealist Short Fiction

Katherine Skvorak

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MADONNA, MONSTER AND OTHER STORIES: SURREALIST SHORT FICTION

by

Katherine Skvorak

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(English)

The Honors College

University of Maine

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## ABSTRACT

Surrealist literature has a long history of excluding female writers from the conversation, and as a result, women surrealists often wrote to critique the male/female binary and examine the oppressive forces denying their work. *Madonna, Monster and Other Stories* acts as a continuation of the female surrealist legacy and a further exploration and critique of invisible authorities that govern societal standards, create belief systems, and control logic and reason. Using methods created by the surrealist movement, such as the Exquisite Corpse exercise, image collaging, and automatic writing, these stories embrace the unconscious, the dreamlike, and the uncanny to break down realities and create them anew.

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## ARTIST DISQUISITION

When I enrolled at the University of Maine and decided to also enroll in the Honors College, I promised myself that my final thesis would be the best work I could create, a complete representation of myself and all I had learned. As my freshman year ended and I started brainstorming thesis topics, my mind was all over the place. Fiction has always had my heart and since I was young, I used creative writing as a means to explore the world around me. My initial descent into creative writing began in middle school, in which I was taught to write strictly realism. “Write what you know,” my teachers told me, and this continued into the beginning of my college career. My writing was heavily focused on my own experiences, working to create in-depth descriptions and fully formed characters based on people I knew. My writing was described by teachers and professors as lyrical, verging on narrative poetry. It was all I had known to write, and so I began considering fictionalizing events in my own life as a thesis topic. I narrowed my ideas down to retelling a family history of my great uncle, whose death uncovered a crime. When I began writing this version of my thesis, I was met not only with a guilty conscience for using my family’s personal stories, but also with the realization that this writing did not seem natural. It was forced, hard to get through, and uninspired. I had been used to writing within my own experiences for so long, but it no longer felt meaningful. My life and my family’s stories were too familiar, which felt like a short-cut in my thesis process. I wanted to challenge myself with my Honors Thesis and work on something new, something completely individual, and something entirely from my own

mind. My first idea a flop, I continued my career as an Honors student committed to finding a new thesis topic.

Around this time, I was taking an advanced fiction workshop with Dave Kress. Inspired by Professor Kress's wacky writing style, sense of humor, and strange subject matter, I churned out two stories within this thesis, *Madonna*, *Monster* and *Sky Writing* from prompts in his class. I was new to this experimental, imaginative writing style and felt much more comfortable in my lyrical fiction, and my final portfolio for the fiction workshop did not include *Madonna*, *Monster* or *Sky Writing*. I kept these stories to myself until two semesters later, when I learned about the Stephen Grady Awards. I received an email just days before the deadline to submit, so I quickly skimmed through the Creative Writing folder on my laptop to find some stories that might be worthy to send in. I finally settled on *Madonna*, *Monster* and *Sky Writing*, thinking that, at the very least, the stories were unique enough to get some attention. My expectations were not at all high, as these stories had never been edited by a third party, never looked over and critiqued. They were written in a style completely new to me. These stories were weird, absurd, and focused on world-building and social critiques over anything else. I forgot about my submission afterwards and went on writing lyrical stories.

Weeks later, I received a congratulatory text from a friend within the English Department. I had been awarded first place in the Grady Awards for undergraduate fiction. I was shocked. My submission had been a stab in the dark but receiving a Grady Award gave me validation to continue writing within this new genre. After sharing my piece with my peers and reading them publicly in the New Writing Series, the general feedback was that this style deserved more attention. This strange new genre, which I

later recognized was surrealism, was exciting and new. I continued exploring the genre until it came time to finalize my thesis topic.

Eventually, I decided to work with what scared me more. I already knew all about my own life and my family; I didn't feel as though it would be a challenging enough thesis. While my lyrical writing was a comfortable style for me, I wanted to go beyond what I was accustomed to. I wanted to write stories that pushed me past the limits I had previously known. Continuing what I had started with *Madonna*, *Monster* and *Sky Writing* was much more open-ended and gave me room to experiment with form, subject matter, and style. The Honors Thesis process is meant to push students to their limits, and I've certainly been pushed outside my comfort zone while writing these stories. As a writer, I've been told what seems like millions of times to write what I know, but this never seemed like a valuable endeavor to me. If writing was my way of exploring the world, why would I stay in my realm of familiarity instead of venturing out into the unknown? This absurd and fantastic writing style gave me the opportunity to not only investigate my own thoughts, writing process, and perspectives, but to go beyond my usual interpretations of the world and explore my own unconscious.

My first experience within non-realist writing, to which I had become so accustomed, was in the Honors Civilizations Sequence reading Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. I had heard of the novella before and was already intimidated by what I had been told: that it was odd, nonsensical, and disturbing. But once I began reading the novella and learned of Kafka's purpose behind his work, I fell in love with the strangeness and the seemingly random elements of the story, which I realized were very much intentional after a closer reading. Many of my classmates did not respond in a



similar way, and I felt like I had been let in on a wonderful secret: that fantastic literature pushed limits and warped reality. I knew it was my kind of writing.

The more I dug into fantastic writing and explored the world of non-realism, the more I recognized my own work and my own ideas within the form of surrealism. Leonora Carrington was my grand introduction to this genre with her short story *The Debutante*. I somehow felt at home within the absurd concept of a hyena wearing a maid's face and replacing a young girl at her coming out party. Carrington's writing was sharp-witted while still being meaningful, gruesome with a humorous twist, and gave me an ideal to work towards. Carrington was also a talented visual artist, and it was clear to me that her writing and her visual art were in close conversation with each other. As a lover of creating art myself, Carrington inspired me to explore the ways in which my own visual art influences my writing and vice versa. Her status as one of the original female surrealists further cemented my admiration of her work.

As a female writer myself, I sought out women writers to inspire my own process and Sabrina Orah Mark became a cornerstone of my surrealist experience. I was able to meet Mark during her visit to the University of Maine and having been inspired by her unique images and word play, I wanted to dive deeper into experimental and abstract writing. I attended a fiction workshop with her and about eight other English students. As an exercise, Mark asked us to choose excerpts from our favorite pieces of writing and directly translate each word to its opposite. I chose Italo Calvino's *The Distance of the Moon*, a story Professor Kress had introduced me to. The translation exercise forced me to view each word as an individual idea, a stand-alone piece with a complete and holistic world revolving around it. Many of Mark's pieces in *Wild Milk* had the same effect on

me, pushing my understanding of language, communication, and their failures. Two of the stories within my thesis were inspired by my work with Mark and by her writing:

*Peace Lilies* and *Instead of a Boring Goldfish*.

*Peace Lilies* was an experiment, much more abstract than I was used to writing, but I wanted to explore veins of misplaced or unexpected images, like the skeleton of a horse being used as a barrette or a person feeling like a heart attack. What attracted me so much to Mark's writing was her ability to create meaning and legibility through these strange images and I worked to carefully choose each moment in the story. I had also been interested in Mark's methods of exploiting language itself and presenting its flaws, so a theme of twisted or abnormal communication methods seemed natural for me to write within.

I had also noticed themes of motherhood throughout Mark's writing, and *Instead of a Boring Goldfish* came as my interpretation of parenthood without being a parent. It seemed fitting to have the metaphorical baby in the story represent my art. I wanted to critique the commercialization of original art, and the portrayal of this art as a human baby exaggerated the almost immoral nature of selling personal art.

As someone interested in the legacy of female writers before me, Carrington and Mark were the mothers that nurtured my own surrealist exploration. When the beginning of my journey began with research into surrealist history and key figures, I expected to see names such as Carrington. However, I was surprised to find that female surrealists were rarely mentioned, and instead I encountered names such as André Breton, Salvador Dali, and Louis Aragon many times throughout my research process. Leonora Carrington was deeply intertwined with the movement, yet often left out of the conversation. The

surrealist movement of the 1930's consisted largely of male artists driving the movement and negotiating the ways in which surrealist worked. The presence of female artists was lacking, as the male-dominated movement mostly viewed women as muses and vehicles for inspiration rather than major artists themselves. This idealized version of women was referred to as the *femme-enfant*, a child-like and moldable image of women which undermined and rejected their agency. Many female surrealists, on the occasion they were recognized as artists and creators rather than objects, refused the surrealist label, and understandably so. Besides this label undermining female artistry at its core, the ability to work within the subconscious was a luxury not usually afforded to women creators. Oppressed by their male counterparts within their field and style, many times the work created by female writers was based in their own realities. Leonora Carrington's relationship with Max Ernst as both his lover and his muse translated into her writing through dreamlike depictions of authority figures ruling over young female characters. The feminine role in surrealism was twisted and dreamlike, as disturbing and uncanny as any surrealist story or art piece. Original female surrealists, at the time of the movement, tended to write towards this reality and explore issues of authority and oppression within the male/female binary.

My exploration of surrealism has brought me to a similar viewpoint as the female surrealists before me, and I have worked within the same ideas of authority and oppressor versus oppressed, but my goal has been to go beyond the gender binary. I wanted to investigate themes of invisible authority, such as the beliefs or systems that govern a society and the natural laws that control logic and reason. Surrealism became a great outlet for me to examine these systems and beliefs, as I could twist them to the extreme

while still tapping into the uncanny and operating under my own unconscious views of reality. Amplifying and distorting the reality of the rules that govern societies and placing them within dream-like landscapes made it possible for me to not only view these systems, but to evaluate and criticize them as well. For example, *Madonna, Monster* explores the religious ideals and values that we use to create meaning, *Birthday Suit* portrays the exploitation of the lower class for upper class commercial gain, and *The Old Man and the Moon* questions love as an influence on our actions and thoughts.

My initial inspiration for these stories came not from conscious critiques of authority, but from my own curiosity. My exploration of surrealist writing led me to practice many of the exercises used by past writers, such as the Exquisite Corpse method, collaging images from newspapers and magazines, and collecting random words. These exercises often produced glimpses into the weird, otherworldly, and uncanny. These dissociative activities which allowed unconscious instincts to take over were my first stepping-stones in creating fully grown and fleshed out stories. Images I discovered in my collaging activities, like the famous surrealist art piece *Object* by Méret Oppenheim of a cup and saucer covered in fur, would spark interest and become the basis for a story. Oppenheim's work directly inspired the fourth story in this thesis, *Birthday Suit*. Phrases I put together through random word generators made me wonder what kind of world these words would make sense together in. *Ode to the Apocalypse*, for example, was inspired by the combination poetry and apocalypse, made through word generation. I allowed myself to word-vomit in these practices, and many of the pieces came out mostly illegible and nonsensical, but this became an important practice to inspire creativity and remind myself that not everything I write needs to be perfect on the first try. Throughout

this thesis process, my explorations into surrealism and my study of the movement forced me to become comfortable with imperfections and unsuccessful stories. I never considered these practices a waste of time because they did, in the end, lead me closer to the rest of my stories.

After using dissociative methods to unearth the bones of a story, my next step was finding the fat and muscle of the stories. I would begin to put concrete words and phrases I created in my practices into a more sensical order, taking the ideas I had and giving them a place to exist outside my own head. The subconscious inspiration that started my stories were translated into ink, and my writing finally became a conscious act of creating readability. My rather raw first drafts were often scribbled into my notebooks. It was always easier to get my ideas out with pen and paper, physically moving across spaces on the paper rather than on a computer. As a very visual person, it helped me to be able to cross out words, draw pictures where I didn't know what words to use, and write reminders to myself in the margins for later reference. Images or clumps of words that seemed to fit would go together in little bubbles that I would circle a million times to remind myself that I wanted these included in the final draft. My first drafts looked like the scribbles of a crazy person, and I'm sure I was sufficiently judged in the library or coffee shop by onlookers who witnessed ideas coming out of my head.

Eventually, I gave these stories bodies and skins to live in, and the road maps I had created were put into full legibility on my laptop, and when I felt as though they were fleshed out enough to be viable, these drafts would be sent to my thesis advisor. We worked through my own concerns about these drafts and brainstormed ways to fix what I saw to be issues with the stories. Much of the time, these edits consisted of writing

exposition and creating more tension leading up to the climax of each story. I tended to write directly to the point in my first drafts, and my edits needed to create more of a story arc. Successful surrealist stories, in my eyes, draw the reader in and keep them engaged while building up the suspense and the strangeness of the surrealist world, until all is turned upside down and the reader is left facing their own unconscious through the eyes of the story. Much of my editing process consisted of drawing the reader in more, gaining their trust and belief in the world I had created. The editing process opened my eyes to how I write and how I can learn from the shortcomings in my work. Looking back over my stories and making necessary changes helped me examine my own flaws as a writer and find ways to improve.

This thesis process, besides developing my writing and creating methods, has helped me find my own identity as a writer. Prior to writing the stories included in this thesis, I felt as though I could write in multiple styles, but never loved what I was creating. Surrealism opened a new world of thinking through my writing, my art, and my reality, which had previously dominated my writing style. This collection may mark the end of my college career at the University of Maine, but it also represents the beginning of the rest of my experience with surrealism and the start of my writing career.

## CREATIVE WORK

### *Madonna, Monster*

The son of God watched on jealously as Mary cradled the coelacanth, cooing. It hissed back, a sort of wet rasping noise like water against stone. Jesus rolled his eyes and stomped away, wobbling on his feet, still puffy with baby fat.

Mary didn't bother watching him walk away, and the baby muttered a curse towards his unappreciative mother. The coelacanth's scales squished between her fingers, and its mouth flapped open and snapped shut again, gasping for water.

"That thing's gonna die," Jesus called over his shoulder, stopping to steady himself on the low-hanging branch of a willow tree and adjust his wet cloth diaper. Mary just stroked the monster's glistening flesh again.

"Sweet baby," she mumbled to it adoringly. It shuddered in her arms and died.

"See?" Jesus said, peering over his dimpled shoulder. "I told you."

A crowd was beginning to form at an observational distance around them, eyes wide. Mary smiled at them, inviting them in for a closer look. A few children scurried up and rested their hands on her knees, covered modestly in blue silk. "What is it?"

"A miracle," she replied. Jesus threw up his arms in exasperation.

The children gaped at the coelacanth in awe. Its mouth hung open and its body was limp, growing colder and colder. Mary shared her shawl with it to warm it up.

"Sweet baby," she whispered again.

“It’s dead! What good does it do if it’s dead?” Jesus cried. His grip on the willow branch slipped and he stumbled forward, landing on his knees.

One of the children reached out to pet the coelacanth’s mossy green scales, and his father ran up to slap his hand away.

“Don’t be disrespectful,” he scolded.

The child burst into tears.

“It’s okay,” Mary told him reassuringly. “Don’t cry, lovely.”

Jesus teetered back over to the crowd. “It’s a dead fish!” he yelled. “I’m the son of God! That’s just a dead fish! I’m more important!”

“The Coelacanth has been around since the beginning of time,” Mary told the children around her, ignoring Jesus’s protest. The adults nodded approvingly. “And He will live until the end of time. He is greater than all of us.”

The coelacanth drooped in agreement.

Jesus shoved his way through the throng of children. His wet diaper chafed against his bottom, but he ignored it, crawling between legs and dodging elbows. He reached Mary and tugged on her robes.

“Mother! Why won’t you pay attention to me?”

He tugged harder and Mary’s arms shifted, the coelacanth slipping from her grasp. She flailed her arms, desperately trying to catch it, but it landed with a wet thud on the rocky ground.

The crowd went silent and Jesus looked up to his mother. Her face was frozen in horror, lines creasing her forehead and her mouth pursed into a tiny circle.

“Dammit,” Jesus said.



Tears welled in Mary's eyes and she raised her trembling hands to her cheeks.

Jesus stepped gingerly over the archaic creature, careful to keep his toes away from its slimy fins. "Don't worry," he announced, addressing the crowd with his arms outstretched. "I am the son of God and I am here to—"

The crowd shoved against him suddenly as another child pushed through, clutching a second coelacanth in its pudgy arms. Mary raised her head and exclaimed in joy when she saw it. "Oh!"

The child grinned, placing it into her arms. The new coelacanth gurgled and flapped against Mary's restraints, black eyes bulging. "He lives!" she cried, holding the creature up. Cheers surged through the crowd, and the old coelacanth was dragged away from Mary's feet.

Mary laughed, delighted. "He formed out of the depths of nothingness when the world was created, and He will live on until the world is destroyed!" She hugged the monster, pressing her dewy lips to its pulpous flesh and squeezing until the coelacanth let out a watery cry and suffocated.

"Oh, for the love of God," Jesus sighed.

## *The Old Man and the Moon*

I saw an old man once pull down the moon from the night sky. *How strange*, I thought to myself, walking quietly towards him. *I've never seen such a thing*.

I was out walking to find some peace and found myself having wandered particularly far from my home, into the poor neighborhoods on the outskirts of town. The man stood with his back to me, shoulders tense and his neck craned to the sky.

He yanked his lasso again and again until he was holding the milky orb in his arms. He was breathing heavy, struggling under the weight of such a cumbersome object.

I called out to him, a stranger in the shadows of the nearby buildings, and offered to carry the moon for him, curious.

He jumped, some of the moon liquid spilling over onto his shoes, but graciously accepted. "Thank you so much," he said, passing the moon over. His wrinkled hands were stained a foggy white.

"Where are you bringing it?" I asked.

"Just around the bend here, back home." He patted me on the back, and I walked with him, eager to hear what his business was with the moon.

The night was even darker without the moon lighting up the sky, but it shone brightly in my arms and I had to squint against the glow to see where the old man was taking me. The front of my shirt was starting to stick to my skin, soaked with the liquid.

"Why are you bringing the moon home?" I asked, struggling to keep up.

"My wife is too frail to move, and bathing in the moon is the only thing that makes it hurt less," he explained, gathering up the loose ends of his lasso.

“Do you do this every night?”

“No,” he smiled sadly. “I would like to, but the missus insists we leave it up for the enjoyment of others most nights. Besides, only full moons really give enough liquid.”

Some of the moon sloshed out of its round shape and fell to the ground. I apologized, but the old man didn’t seem to mind. “You’re doing a much better job than I ever do,” he laughed.

We rounded the corner block of buildings, stepping over loose cobblestones and broken concrete. “It’s just up here,” he promised, noticing my struggle, and led me towards a modest, stout house with two small windows glowing a warm yellow.

He opened the door for me, and I carried the moon inside. “This is my wife,” he introduced me, sweeping his arm towards an old woman huddled by the fireplace, wrapped in a tattered quilt. She was asleep, her eyes closed and her body still. The fireplace lit up the deep crevices crisscrossing her face.

The old man took off his cap and hung it on a hook by the door. “If you wouldn’t mind following me into the bathroom,” he explained, “you can put it right in the tub.” I trailed after him, my arms aching from the watery weight.

The house was small and cramped but well-loved, filled with soft-cushioned chairs, antique rugs worn out in the middle, and black and white framed photos of the couple.

The bathroom door was almost too narrow for the moon to fit through, and the old man helped me twist and turn it. I stumbled in finally and deposited the moon into the rusted tub with a grunt. It lost its form almost immediately and sloshed against the walls of the bathtub, leaving streaks of white and silver.

The old man reached out and shook my hand. “I can’t thank you enough. Can I get you a dry shirt to change into?”

I accepted his offer, already feeling a chill, and the old man disappeared into the room next door. I sat on the edge of the tub, watching the liquid shimmer and twist against itself, as if moved by a current.

He brought me a wool sweater with patches on the sleeves. “It’s not as nice as that shirt,” he laughed, embarrassed, but I assured him it would do just fine.

“Do you need help lifting your wife and bringing her in?” I asked, hoping to see the moon’s healing power in action.

He twisted his hands. “You really wouldn’t mind?”

So we went to carefully gather up his wife, tattered quilt and all. She managed to sleep through the whole process, but her husband caught my eye and smiled sadly. “She sleeps most of the time these days.” She weighed much less than the moon and her body stayed rigid and tight under the quilted cocoon. Her head sagged against my chest as we carried her to the bathroom, gray hair trailing across my forearms. She smelled sickly sweet, like overripe fruit.

We placed her on the floor and her head lolled back onto the tile. I focused on her chest, becoming unnerved, and waited to see her breathe. “Is she... is she okay?” I asked, panic rising in my throat.

He waved his hand dismissively and I closed my eyes and held my breath while he finished undressing her and heaved her into the moon.

When I opened my eyes, the old man leaned back, pleased with himself. His wife had sunken into the moon up to her chin and her clothes lay in a heap beside the tub. Her eyes stayed closed.

“See?” he said, looking up at me.

But nothing happened. The old woman lay hunched in the foggy liquid and showed no signs of healing, no movement. The silver moon reflected against her face and she looked even paler than before. Her body lost traction and slid down further, her forehead ducking under the silver before the old man jumped forward and pulled her back out.

“Jesus,” I whispered, gripping the edge of the sink. I felt bile rise against the scratchy fabric at my throat.

He wiped off her face with the sleeve of his shirt and cooed to her. “Sorry,” he said, turning to me. “Sometimes she just slips.”

“I’m so sorry,” I mumbled, backing out of the room.

“For what?” This is where she likes to be. Beautiful, right?”

I glanced back at him. His face was lit up, eyes crinkled in the corners, and he reached out to brush his wife’s hair from her face. I wasn’t sure what to say. I wasn’t sure what to think.

“Give us thirty minutes and I’ll walk you back, if you don’t mind carrying the moon again,” he called to me.

The old man stayed with her body and the moon, combing her hair and massaging the water into her arms and hands. I waited outside by the armchair, staring into the fire and forcing my stomach to still.

Finally, he collected his wife in his arms and brought her into their bedroom to redress her in clean clothes. “If you wouldn’t mind just gathering up the moon?” he asked, ducking around the corner to raise his eyebrows at me.

I snapped out of my daze and went to recollect the moon, scooping it back into an orb hanging heavily between my hands. A few stray hairs lay in a clump on the tub where the old woman’s head had rested and I turned quickly, squeezing my eyes shut.

The old man emerged from the bedroom, clapping me on the back and guiding me to the door. I glanced back at his wife on the way out, stiff and still on their bed. I wished for her to twitch, to move, to do anything, but her body was motionless.

We walked in silence down the block, he, satisfied with the night’s accomplishments, and I, sickened. When we reached the spot I first found him standing with his lasso tied tight around the moon’s swollen belly, he turned to me. “You can keep that shirt. It’s the least I can do.” It still smelled like overripe fruit. “Now quick,” he said, eyeing the first rays of the sun. “Put it back before it’s too late.”

So I gave the moon a heave towards the heavens and watched it float back to its original position. It paled against the morning light and the old man sighed, neck craned up to it once again. “Sure is beautiful, isn’t it?” he asked, smiling. “She loves the moon so much, I’m sure you just made her night.”

“How long have you... been doing this?” I asked, thinking about the woman’s fixed joints creaking against my arms.

“Almost a year. She’s been sick for almost a year.”

“Good god,” I whispered to myself. “A year.”

“And you know, I don’t think she would still be around if it wasn’t for the moon. Keeps her going. Keeps me going,” he babbled, waving his arm to the paling silhouette in the sky.

“Do people know you’re doing this?”

“Oh, no. They would take her away, put her in a hospital. They wouldn’t understand what the moon can do. They wouldn’t care.”

The sun finally crowned the horizon, sending blinding light into my eyes. I blinked and shielded myself against it when the old man stepped towards me and grabbed me by the shoulders.

“You can’t tell anyone. No one can know.” He shook me to emphasize his words, his face backlit and shadowed by the brilliant sun. “They can’t take her away from me.”

I pushed his hands off and scrambled away, the sweater growing hotter and scratchier on my skin. “I’m sorry,” I sputtered, backing away.

“You can’t tell anyone!” he yelled to me, starting to follow, and I broke into a run away from him and the dying moon and the rising sun.

## *Peace Lilies*

We misplaced the phone in the phone booth three months ago and since then, it has been a coveted position to be the phone in the phone booth. It is tiring, draining, horribly saddening at times, but so beautiful to deliver oceans of rivers and words back and forth.

The man who was hired as the phone in the phone booth has no name, but I think I went to grade school with him. If I'm correct, he sat behind me in the fifteenth period and obsessively folded tiny paper replicas of various skeletal structures. My favorite was the horse, and I stole it to wear in my hair like a barrette. I got so many compliments at lunch that day.

He does his job as the phone in the phone booth quite well, despite being so new at it, and his voice carries a unique timbre that adds so much character to a message. When I called work to tell them I quit, he recited my words out to my boss and she feverishly hand-cut confetti just to throw at him. She even gave me a quitting bonus of four thousand dollars. I used it to buy a real horse skeleton off Amazon.

He keeps the messages of the town, the stories of survival and lust, and packs them behind his molars like a wad of gum. He spits the stories out so wonderfully, so artfully, into our outstretched hands to pack into our ears like wax.

I got a call late one evening from my mother and dressed quickly in a long coat to trot down to the phone booth. The phone in the phone booth waved from inside and motioned for me to come in. We made small talk for a minute or two before he became antsy.



“I think you should take the call now,” he told me. His face drooped, serious.

“Let’s hear it, then!”

And he delivered what felt like a bouquet of peace lilies from his mouth. I took all the flowers gently in my hands and cupped them to my ear. The lilies told me my father had passed. It was so, so beautiful.

I fluttered around him in a circle, my long coat streaming behind me. “Thank you,” I said, “for telling me. Thank you.”

He frowned at me and I imagined rivers in his frown lines. “Are you not sad?”

I choked out a sob and danced around him faster. “It’s just so beautiful,” I told him, and rivers ran down my face too, “when you speak. Like a hummingbird’s throat. Or the opening of a cave.” I grabbed his hands and twirled under them. “Or the footprint of a bee.”

His hands felt like soap and I wanted to wash myself under the rivers of my eyes. “Do you want me to call your mother back?” he asked. In his eyes, I saw animals decomposing and turning into paper skeletons.

“Yes, please, if you would,” my voice cracked. I waved my coat like a matador and imagined horns growing out of his head and gouging me in the stomach. “Ask her why. Ask her how. Tell her how I am, what I am. Tell her I miss my father, tell her I miss her. Tell her I want to decompose like the animals in your eyes. And I want my father to bloom like peace lilies.”

He nodded and I stepped out of the phone booth, sobbing and clutching myself. I could finally stop dancing, now that I couldn’t hear him speak, and the phone in the

phone booth called my mother back. I waited on the curb, letting my rivers run over my shoes.

She came quicker than I expected for having such horrible peace lily news, and her black eyes were puffy and wet like unmolded clay. She nodded to me from the other side of the phone booth and entered solemnly. I could see the phone in the phone booth's mouth moving, relaying my message, and my mother clutched an imaginary string of pearls and ran her fingers over his lips. She was transfixed, just as anyone is by the phone in the phone booth's voice, and tears ran like diamonds from her clay eyes.

I waited until she was done with the phone and she sat on the curbside opposite me. I re-entered the phone booth, and the man turned to me and gave me her message. Heart attack. That's how he died and that's how she felt. Out of breath and ugly, violent. The phone in the phone booth held my hand, cradled my fingers in his, and I felt like a pressed flower. Out of breath and beautiful, but only when looked at.

## *Birthday Suit*

The mayor of the neighboring city once gifted me with a chalice made of fur. It was silly, completely absurd, but one should never refuse a gift, especially from a mayor. Such a thing could result in the worst.

He gave it to me wrapped in fresh human skin, which I politely tore off, leaving ribbons on his office floor. I had left my handkerchief at home and didn't know what to do with the blood on my hands, so he offered me the sleeve of his pressed suit. "It'll wash right off the material with water," he assured me as I left bands of red around his wrists and returned to my gift.

"It's lovely," I remarked, turning it in my hands. The chalice caved in on itself with too much pressure, but he promised me it worked.

"The best part is that the fur holds onto the flavor of your drink. So wine tonight will bleed into your coffee tomorrow, and your coffee tomorrow will bleed into our mead the next day!" His smile was wide.

"How... uncommon."

His fair skin flushed with pride, the creamy hue tinged with pink. "I designed it myself. I plan on making an entire collection, perhaps replacing all the dining ware in the city with it! It makes much more sense than what we use now, don't you think?"

Dining ware made of fur! Who would come up with such a senseless idea? "Of course," I lied.

He wiggled excitedly, his eyes bright. "The fur is from wild pronghorn, caught in the woods on the outskirts of the city."

“And here I thought the pronghorn was extinct!” I had vague memories of pronghorn from my childhood, back when they became the cities’ final animal to be declared extinct. No one had been too saddened to hear of the loss; their meat and hide had little value and they were used only by the lowest classes. “And where is the wrapping from?” I asked, gesturing to the discarded skin at my feet. I found it much lovelier than the foolish chalice.

“Oh, from the west side of town, of course. Only the best. I would never insult such an important guest with product from the east side.”

“And how kind of you that is. It sure is beautiful.” I poked the shreds of skin with the toe of my shoe, wondering who it had belonged to.

As if reading my mind, the mayor spoke up. “She was a merchant’s daughter. Hand-picked by my chief advisor.” He laughed. “She didn’t go easy, that’s for sure. But in the end, we all have our duties to our cities, don’t we?” He took my elbow, guiding me out of his office and into the hallway. “I’d love to show you our harvesting machine now. Perhaps your city could benefit from one?”

“We certainly could. Our human harvesters have grown lazy as of late.”

He clucked his tongue sympathetically, ushering me towards the elevator. “We keep our harvester on the bottom floor,” he explained. “The noise is rather loud.”

“You know, I employed a blind draw system in my city. The first of its kind,” I told him. His silky suit shone under the fluorescent elevator lights. It was very impressively sewn, and the material itself was unbelievably smooth.

“Marvelous!” The mayor clasped his hands together, delighted. “I would have never thought of that! Has it worked well?”

“Oh yes, it’s very organized.” The fur chalice had folded itself into a small wad as I passed it from one hand to the other. I considered stuffing it into my pocket to rid my hands of the unusual texture, but the mayor was watching too closely. “They still struggle, of course, but with such a large population, I always reassure them that the chances they get chosen are slim to none. Until they do get picked, that is. Sometimes we have to lie in our jobs to protect those we serve.”

He nodded, adding, “And of course, the economy has to keep going.”

“Exactly. And without product, how are we to supply our cities with what they need?” The elevator lurched to a stop and we walked out into a dimly lit corridor, a steel door looming in front of us. “And most of them do understand that,” I continued, anticipating the machine I had heard so much about. “Although I’m sure it must be odd to go to bed on a blanket that used to be your father!”

The mayor laughed heartily, and his bulbous stomach bounced beneath his jacket. “It must be!”

I looked back down at the fur wad in my hands. “I never would have thought to use any other type of hide. I just assumed the supply of product wouldn’t be enough.”

“It’s certainly limited, but perhaps with enough time, we’ll be able to run entire cities off animal hide.”

I hid my frown. Animal hide was so hideous compared to human skin and held hardly any value. I certainly would not be using animal hide in my city.

The mayor tugged open the steel door with a grunt and, with a theatrical flourish, welcomed me into the harvesting room.

The machine towered over us, glinting silver and black. Knobs, pulleys, saws, and ropes hung off the open tube in the center like the sharpened teeth of an animal's maw. The mayor waited, watching my reaction. "It's a very impressive machine," I told him, laying my hand on the cool surface and feeling it vibrate and hum beneath my fingers. "We would certainly benefit from the mechanization of such a process."

"I would be happy to advise you in the creation and installation of your own machine."

"You're too kind." I laid my hand on his shoulder in gratitude and my fingers slid across the silky material. "Machine aside, I must ask. I've been admiring your suit this whole time. Who did this belong to?"

His eyes glittered. "Promise me you won't judge?" I shook my head, scoffing. He leaned in close and whispered, "My brother!"

"You didn't!" I slapped him on the arm, gasping. "How clever!"

He shrugged, clearly embarrassed by the attention. "The best status always makes the best product, and my family has been running this city for generations."

"It's perfectly even in tone. I must say I'm quite astonished by it!"

"I wish I could offer you a matching suit, but unfortunately we've used my brother all up."

The mayor's skin was also perfectly even in tone, but I shook the idea off.

"It's such a comfortable suit. I'll admit that I wear it more than I should." He grinned toothily. "I even wore it at his funeral. I couldn't help myself!"

"Well, that must have been a lovely tribute to him." I forced myself to smile, but I

couldn't stop considering the mayor's skin. I was in the market for a new business suit, and his skin would certainly tan beautifully.

"Perhaps I could make you a suit in the pronghorn hide," the mayor suggested, gesturing to the concave chalice lying forgotten in my palm.

"How fantastic that would be." I nodded slowly, thinking. "Yes, why don't you come visit our city? Perhaps you can participate in our blind drawing, just to see how successful it is."

The mayor shook my hand. "I would be honored." He winked. "Just make sure my name doesn't get picked!"

"Oh, of course not," I told him, taking one last look at his porcelain skin.

"Afterall, the chances are so slim!"

## *The Interview*

I missed the train to my job interview and thought briefly of throwing myself onto the tracks. But that wouldn't be productive, as there were no more trains for at least half an hour and I would have found myself lying, quite alive, on dirty rubble and rock.

And, of course, I couldn't go back through the turnstiles, otherwise my ticket would be rendered useless. I decided to wait in the dank, dripping underground for the next train.

The station was almost empty, save a few school children chasing each other and a lonely saxophone player in the corner. I shook out my hands anxiously and eyed them. The saxophone player blared a low note in my direction, and I tried to smile back, though I think he meant it as a threat.

I checked my watch. My interview was in forty-five minutes. If I didn't make it in time, perhaps they would wait for me. Perhaps they wouldn't mind my tardiness, but rather find it endearing and quirky. Perhaps we would joke about it in a few months over scones and coffee at our desks, when I had firmly settled into the new job. Perhaps.

To calm my electric nerves, I slumped against a cement column stalagmiting from the damp floor. I had nothing to entertain me and certainly wasn't willing to stare at children or simply listen to the whomping notes of the saxophone. I stuck my hands in my pockets and fished around.

I had about two inches of lavender string, left over from sewing a button back onto my tattered jacket, a few crumbs from my morning biscuit, a tooth I had found during a walk in the woods last week, and my hand-held Scrabble set.



I pulled the Scrabble set out and turned it over in my hands. The tiles moved like bones inside, clinking and scraping against each other, as though the box was a human body, broken and untethered by tendon or muscle. Perhaps my future coworkers would play with me.

Movement at my foot caught my eye and I looked up to find a subway rat inching quietly past me. It seemed to notice my attention and stopped, rearing onto its hind legs to appraise me. I held the box of Scrabble tiles up. “Wanna play?” I joked. The subway rat sat back down.

I poured the tiles out and laid the box carcass beside me. The rat scurried forward and pawed at the box. It scraped against the rough concrete and he shuddered away. I absentmindedly spelled some words out, like thaumaturgy and ennui and mercurial, while the rat explored the letters and occasionally sniffed at them or moved them around.

The subway rat took particular interest in a few tiles, chewing at the edge of the letter O and I moved to bat it out of his pink hands. He dropped it and instead bumped it with his nose. I spelled the word rat and showed him.

“That’s you,” I said. “Rat.” He ran over the letters and sent them skittering across the ground.

Perhaps the train would be here soon. Perhaps my tardiness would be excused. Perhaps the new employer would still like me.

We shuffled the tiles around for a few more minutes, and I was careful not to make any sudden movements towards the rat. He seemed to be trusting me more and more and I would be remiss to not admit I also felt some sort of appreciation for his company.

He was rather intentional in his movements, very precise and almost thoughtful as he inspected each letter and I gently explained to him what the numbers at the bottom of the tiles meant.

“I played with my last employer once,” I told the rat. “I won on the word petrichor. He didn’t even know what it meant! And my employer before that? Thought firstly was a word. Webster must have rolled over in his grave.” The rat seemed to half-listen, moving tiles about with his nose. It was almost as though he was collecting the ones he liked.

The saxophone player took a quick break to inhale and began his music again, this time even louder. The children’s laughs reminded me of dragonflies and their picnic-blanket dresses blurred pink as they spun.

The rat moved in time with the saxophone player’s music, quicker and quicker, flipping over tiles like he was looking for a particular letter. He paused at the letter J and snatched it from the ground to carry it back to his pile of selected tiles.

“What are you doing, little guy?” I asked him. He turned to me and I leaned over to see.

“Join us,” his tiles spelled out. The saxophone melody soared.

“Join us?” I mumbled. A coincidence. A strange coincidence. Perhaps the train would be here soon. Perhaps this subway rat knew exactly what he was doing.

The rat looked up at me with blank black eyes. I stared back and finally laughed, shaking my head. “Strange, you’re a strange little guy.”

The subway rat pushed the tiles at me, its eyes bulging like ticks, almost unattached to its matted white face. “Join you?” I asked him, frightened, and the rat seemed to nod and hiss an affirmative. “I’m late for work— late for a job interview!”

Scurrying and squeaking filled the cavernous station and the subway rat pushed the letters towards me one last time as more rats began to creep up the sides of the tracks and pour out from the cracks in the concrete walls. I swore, pressing against the cold pillar behind me, trying to shake them off my shoes. The subway rat stood on his letters and watched.

I turned to children and the saxophone player in desperation, but they were hunched down among the rats, as though greeting them. “Excuse me! Excuse me, help!” I yelled. They paid me no attention.

The rats crawled up my pant legs and skittered over my hands and I stood, shrieking. The saxophone player dropped his horn and looked up at me. He sneered, his front teeth sticking out like the rats’, his white face turning shadowed and furry. My legs buckled and I fell back into the ocean of subway rats and Scrabble tiles. “I have to get to my interview,” I sobbed to them. “I have to get this job.”

Beeping on the platform pierced the horrible scampering of the rats’ fleshy feet and we all turned to it.

The train to my interview sped past and the rats ran to it, flowing like rivers to hide back under the tracks. White faces dressed in hats and makeup with blank expressions and beady eyes stared out at me through the train windows and I forced myself back to my feet to run beside it, trying to wave at them to stop. The wind blew back the flaps of my jacket and my hastily sewn button flew off. When the train hurtled

through and vanished into the inky black hole of the tracks, I looked down over the edge.

The army of rats was gone.

### *Instead of a Boring Goldfish*

Last time I ran out of fabric, I sewed onto the baby. He screamed the whole time and bit me with his single tooth, but I pushed him back and used his onesie to dab off the blood while my needle went in and out.

“I’m making you beautiful,” I told him. “And that’s all anyone ever wants to be.”

He screamed louder and drool dripped onto my throat. I had to stop and wipe it off, again on his onesie, but I kept plucking away, making shapes on his little body.

“If you had just let me go out to Rosemary’s when I wanted to, we wouldn’t be in this situation,” I told him. “I could’ve gotten plenty of fabric for a very low price and been so happy while you napped and I sewed. I would have made a goldfish, or a pair of lovebirds.”

His skin was so fresh and new that it was hard to be precise enough to make a goldfish or a pair of lovebirds. Instead, I made boxes and squares and filled them up with drool and made them beautiful with my thread.

I tried to force a pacifier into his mouth, but he refused it, spitting it out onto my lap and throwing his head back to shriek. Tears started running down his face and turned my pink thread red. I sighed. “Now it all looks like blood,” I complained. “And you won’t be able to see the dimensions. I worked so hard to make you beautiful.”

But he didn’t want to be beautiful. He kept crying and screaming and spitting up until I had to stop sewing and wring him out over the sink.

“If you had just let me go out to Rosemary’s earlier,” I murmured. “If you hadn’t drooled and bled everywhere, you would have been so beautiful.”

Someone called on the phone and I answered it with one hand while the baby dripped over the sink. “Hello? Yes, just working on it now. I’ll be ready by tomorrow, I promise. Do you mind if it’s sewn onto my child?”

The garbled voice said it was fine and hung up abruptly. The baby finally stopped crying long enough for me to tie off one end of thread and I sang to him while I hurriedly prepared a long charcuterie colored strand, my fingers catching on the ends. He smiled and waved his arms at me. Finally, he was being beautiful.

My husband came home as I stuck the needle into my baby’s back, and he yelled at me from the doorway. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I ran out of fabric,” I explained. “And this was the blankest slate I could find.” I held the baby up. “Look how beautiful.”

“You got the colors all wrong! Didn’t they say chartreuse?”

I looked down at my baby and he looked back up with watery eyes. The charcuterie thread was, in fact, supposed to be chartreuse. I yanked the end out and the baby squirmed.

My husband rubbed our baby’s forehead while I pulled out the charcuterie strands. “I really like what you’ve done. A goldfish would have been boring.” He cooed down to the baby. “She’s making you beautiful and that’s all anyone wants to be.”

It was raining the next day and I had to cover the baby in plastic bags to ensure my work was dry. He had stayed beautiful overnight by some miracle, unaffected by his rolling and turning in the crib.

The client held my baby up in dismay when I presented him at her office. “It was supposed to be a coat.”

“Well,” I said, struggling with my umbrella. “You can still wear it as one. Works perfectly fine.”

The client shrugged the baby onto her back and twisted to look at herself in a mirror. The baby whined and its bottom lip trembled, but it held on tight and the chartreuse strands glistened.

“Not exactly the warmest thing to wear,” the client mumbled, turning this way and that. “Though I like the pop of red you added.”

“Thank you,” I said. I stared the baby down and its bottom lip stopped trembling.

“Smells a bit like cheese.”

“Yes, I accidentally used charcuterie thread instead of chartreuse. A little mix up. Some Febreze will clear it right up.”

“And what happened to the goldfish idea?”

“It would have been boring?” I offered.

She pulled the baby off her back and held it up, appraising it. “You did make it beautifully, and that’s all anyone wants to be.” She set the baby down on her desk and handed me a check. “Thanks again, it did come out great.”

“Take good care of it, hand-wash only, of course!” I joked. The baby stared at me from its perch on the client’s desk, and I gave my beautiful work one last glance before backing out of the office and waving goodbye.

## *Ode to the Apocalypse*

“Welcome, everyone,” Dr. Smith announced, spreading his arms out to the audience, “to our first ever annual poetry reading fundraiser, held by the Association of Earthly Retention and Occupation!” Cheers erupted through the audience and Dr. Smith laughed in delight.

The moon had just risen, lighting up the rugged terrain scorched by the heat of the daytime. A lone coyote with ribs pointing out of his stomach like fingers howled behind Dr. Smith and trotted off into the darkness.

Dr. Smith glanced behind him, frowning, but continued on. “As you know, our aim is to maintain life on this original home we were given years and years ago, despite recent increases in human migration and desertion. With your generous donations, which can be made in that box right behind you,” he said, pointing to a black box with a rather conspicuous dollar sign painted on the front, “we can continue to provide for ourselves here on Earth and maintain our livelihood, all without leaving our beautiful, God-given planet.” He smiled and the patrons clapped politely. “We have refreshments behind you as well, so please help yourselves. Thank you and here is our first reader!”

A man in the last row leaned backwards just far enough to grab a Twinkie from the table, noisily tearing into the plastic wrapping as the first poet approached the stage.

He was a young man, long-limbed and awkward. The spotlights had been arranged artfully by Dr. Smith to showcase the dark oak podium and the dying bushes he had managed to salvage and replant by the stage. The bushes didn’t seem to like the new soil— their dry leaves drooped over and dropped off into piles on the salty soil.



The young man smiled shyly at the audience. “Well, I’m glad we’re doing this at night, otherwise I would be sweating more than I already am!” he laughed, nervous, and pulled at his t-shirt. His underarms were stained with a spreading wetness. “Although I guess it’s hot all the time now, isn’t it?” The audience afforded him a polite laugh. “Alright, this is an original poem, titled ‘The Garden’. Enjoy.”

Dr. Smith shot him a thumbs-up and a wink from his seat in the front row and the speaker cleared his throat. “The sapling in the early spring predicts the flutter of raven’s wing, the trees at once turn green again and tulips bright—”

A deep rumble began low and steady and a few audience members clutched their hands to their ears, trying to block out the noise. With a shout, someone pointed behind the reader, cutting him off, and a meteor came hurtling into view, steaming and black. It slammed hard into the ground just yards behind the stage, sending shockwaves throughout the brown earth. The young man clutched at the podium, trying not to topple it.

Dr. Smith yelled out to the patrons, reassuring them and asking them to calm down. An older woman clutched her hand to her chest. “I’ve never gotten that close to one before,” she sputtered, breathing heavy.

Dr. Smith motioned to the reader. “Keep going!” he shouted about the murmurs of the crowd.

“The trees at once turn green again and tulips bright, against heavy rains bent...” he finished his poem quickly, sporadically glancing over his shoulder at the steaming rock embedded in the orange dirt behind him.

The audience clapped as he finished, and Dr. Smith jogged back up to the podium. “Thank you, how lovely. Just a reminder, folks, we’re perfectly safe here! This planet has taken care of us for this long, and that won’t stop anytime soon. Please stay seated, keep quiet, and respect the readers.” He introduced the next poet and the audience clapped uncertainly.

A middle-aged woman took the podium and brushed a stray lock of graying hair from her eyes. “Hello. This is also an original poem, a free verse titled ‘This Sacred Earth’. It’s the first poem I’ve ever written, so please be kind.”

A trail of fire had broken out from the meteor through what was left of the foliage, slowly creeping closer to the stage. Dr. Smith craned his neck to watch it, his brow wrinkled.

The woman began to share her poem, an ode recalling her childhood spent playing in tall grass and climbing trees. The fire inched closer still, burning the dead leaf piles under the bushes lining the stage. Dr. Smith began to stand, and a sudden burst of hot wind swept through the area and the flames ignited the bushes, sending them up in flames.

The woman behind the podium screamed, scampering away from the fire and the front row jumped up to stomp out the flames, the rubber soles of their shoes growing hot. “We need water!” someone called out, but water was being strictly rationed.

When the fire was packed down into a controlled smolder, Dr. Smith clapped at the poet. “Keep going!” he called, out of breath.

The woman rushed on with the end of her poem, “I am thankful that God has changed our Earth, as I know His plans is true. I miss my tall grass and climbing trees, but I love this new Earth, too. Thank you.”

Half-hearted clapping accompanied her back to her seat, the audience rather unimpressed.

The third reader was the man who had torn into the refreshments table and the corner of his mouth was stained white with Twinkie cream. He introduced his poem and the audience stared, transfixed by his lack of awareness, until he finally licked his dry lips and the cream was taken back into his mouth.

Halfway through his reading, the lone coyote returned, scampering across the burnt ground. “Why couldn’t that have been the first animal to go extinct?” a woman mumbled to her husband.

The coyote darted past the meteor, letting out a ghostly scream when it stepped into the line of fire. The poet stopped and Dr. Smith let out a heavy sigh. “Just keep going!”

The coyote fell onto its side, still crying out in an oddly human pitch, and the audience craned their necks to watch it suffer. In their distraction, no one noticed the ball of fire streaking through the sky behind them.

When it struck the refreshments table with a crash and sent the donation box and Twinkies up in flames, the audience screamed in unison with the coyote, jumping out of their seats and scattering away from the fire engulfing the land behind them.

His face lit up by the orange fire, Dr. Smith shrieked at them, “Everyone sit back down, everything’s fine! We’ll find another box to put donations in!”

But the audience had already fled, echoing the sounds of the coyote, and Dr. Smith was left with the mess of burning Twinkies, folding chairs turned on their sides, and his donations going up in flames.

*Sky Writing*

“Oh, the news is on,” Alice said, peering out the window.

“Must be breaking news,” her husband murmured from his recliner. “Usually doesn’t come on until later.”

“Well come on then, let’s see what they’re saying,” she replied, hurriedly knotting her hair into a bun and pulling on a sweater.

“It’s eighty degrees out, Alice, for Christ’s sake,” her husband called to her, but she was already out the door, eagerly waiting on the sidewalk. The neighbors stood with her, necks craned to see this breaking news.

“How strange,” one of them muttered.

The plane above them looped through the sky, its tail streaming white clouds of exhaust. Alice always wondered how the pilots managed to not throw up with all the turns and twists they threw their planes into.

“W-A-T? I-M—”

“That was an N, I think.”

“B-I-M...”

“Another N.”

“E-C-I-T-Y.”

“Wat in bime city?” Alice tilted her head. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“They’ll spell it again,” a neighbor reassured her.

The silver bird flew in circles until the clouds dissipated and it started over again. Alice and the neighbors spelled the words out together.

“Wer in pinf city?”

The plane went back to drawing circles. “Wer in pinf city. Wat in bime city,” Alice whispered to herself. The neighbors repeated it back, chewing on their fingernails and tapping their hands against their legs.

Alice’s husband finally lumbered down the porch steps. “What’d they say so far?”

“Wat in bime city and wer in pinf city.”

“What in the hell,” he plainly stated. The neighbors nodded.

The plane began its spelling again. Alice called the letters out.

“Oh!” The elderly lady with blue hair from two doors down snapped her fingers.

“War in Pine City!”

“Yes!” Alice cried.

The neighbors clapped, shaking the elderly lady’s hand. “Well done,” they told her. “That’s a good job.”

Alice’s husband was still staring up at the sky. “They’re saying something else.”

“3-2-0-0—”

“That was a five.”

“Where did you get that extra zero from?”

“Is it 320?”

“D-E-A-D.”

“3,200 dead?”

“No, it was 350 dead.”

They all congratulated each other again, Alice standing on her toes to kiss her husband’s cheek. “I love a good puzzle,” she told him. He smiled lazily down at her.

The plane spelled out the news again, and this time, an extra cloud hung purposefully at the plane's tail, melting away slowly into the blue.

The bearded man from next door threw his arms in the air in triumph. "See, I told you there was another zero! It's 3,500 dead."

A neighbor patted him on the back. "Right you were. Well done!"

Alice kept her eyes trained overhead. "I don't know... I'm not sure that was a zero."

The neighbors hushed her. "It doesn't really matter anyways," her husband told her. She nodded agreeably, taking his meaty hand in hers.

"I think that's a record," one neighbor said, checking his watch. "We never figure it out that quickly."

"Maybe they finally got a better pilot," Alice's husband grumbled. She tugged his hand as the neighbors congratulated each other, and they began their slow walk back up the porch steps.

"Good job everyone!" Alice called out over her shoulder. "3,500 dead in the war in Pine City!" She grinned as the rest of the neighbors cheered once more and drifted back into their homes.

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Katie Skvorak grew up in Windham, Maine and graduated in 2016 from Windham High School. She majored in English with a minor in Creative Writing at the University of Maine and participated in Women's Club Lacrosse, Engineers Without Borders, and the MBS Corps. She worked on campus as a Resident Assistant, Writing Center Tutor, Peace Corps Campus Ambassador, and Student Journalist at ASAP Media Services. Throughout her writing career, Katie was published in The Open Field and earned first place for undergraduate fiction in the Grady Awards for Creative Writing. She also received the 2017-2018 and 2019-2020 Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King Scholarship.

Katie plans on moving out west after she graduates and working in event planning and management. She hopes to travel as much as possible, adopt as many dogs as possible, and always write as much as possible.